

NAIKAN REFLECTION: A PATH TOWARD
GRATITUDE AND HEALING

By

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terri Karis", is written over a horizontal line.

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ABSTRACT

What I offer in this study is an autoethnographic exploration of the therapeutic benefits of a Japanese form of psychotherapy called Naikan (literally: looking inward). Increasingly, research studies are showing that individuals whose way of being-in-the-world embodies the virtues of gratefulness, mindfulness, appreciation, and Other-centeredness experience greater joy and satisfaction in their lives in a more consistent fashion than those whose ways do not. The consistent practice of Naikan therapy is said to confer upon the practitioner a more profound sense of gratitude toward life, a greater sense of connectedness to others, a deeper sense of self-awareness, and a more Other-centered moral and relational orientation. The result of such a practice is a greater sense of mental and emotional well-being. In this project, I explored the therapeutic impact of the practice of Naikan therapy upon my own life by engaging in a month long practice of Naikan reflection. In attempting to verify the therapeutic benefits of Naikan

reflection through my own experience, I hoped to contribute in a scholarly, experiential, and meaningful way to the body of knowledge concerning this particular form of psychotherapy, and gratitude studies in general.

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My Father, Mother, and Grandmother,

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and

My Spiritual Mother and Teacher, Mata Amritanandamayi Devi.

*“Gratitude requires attention and reflection. If we don’t pay
attention, the countless and constant ways we are supported
go unnoticed. If we don’t reflect, we fail to acquire the wisdom
that comes with perspective”*

-Gregg Krech

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The following is an academic and personal exploration into the relationship between Naikan reflection and gratitude. It is academic inasmuch as I currently offer this project as an active member of the UW-Stout academic community. It is also scholarly in nature insofar as it will review the most recent research literature in the area of gratitude studies. However, this research paper/project I have quite consciously intended to be a highly experiential and personal journey. At this point in my life, well into my forty-sixth year, I had no interest in expending energy on a purely quantitative or intellectual academic pursuit. On the contrary, I desired to engage in an endeavor that would touch my heart as well as my mind. Hopefully, as a result of this process, the reader's heart and mind will be touched as well.

Statement of the Problem

The initial motivation for this project came from my own personal search for a more deeply satisfying and authentic way of being-in-the-world. Tired and wearied from my own typical, predictable, and dissatisfying responses to life, I slowly became aware of a profound call from the depths of my own soul to begin re-fashioning the way I responded to and moved through a typical day, a typical week, a typical month, and ultimately my own all too typical life. One might say that after forty-six years, a weight of emotional freight lay upon the shoulders of my psyche like so many barnacles encrusted upon the bottom of an old schooner that had seen far too many years at sea. I felt that I was ready for either a permanent dry dock or a good cleaning and a fresh coat of paint. Maybe both. Either way, I had a deep suspicion that something had to change.

It wasn't that I was miserable, mind you. On the contrary, I was in a way somewhat mildly content. I had recently ceased working, taken out a student loan, and returned to graduate school with the intent of becoming a counselor. In my own mind I had secretly decided that dispensing usable and constructive counsel to people struggling with the stuff of life would be a noble and worthy way to not only contribute to the betterment of humanity, but in some fashion to redeem some twenty-five years of my own seeming desert wanderings.

Up to this point my life story, a story perhaps intriguing and exotic in the eyes of some discontented middle class couple of a John Updike novel, had left me single, alone, broke, in debt, and childless, living with two cats whose feline temperaments relayed the ineluctable message that I was as replaceable as I was *homo sapien sapiens*. I wanted more from life but more of what I didn't know. I felt that I was slowly degenerating into a judgmental, critical, demanding, self-centered, and narcissistic, not to mention downright scared human being. And I was tired of being that way. Life felt like a wrestling match in which there was no quarter and where none would be given. In a word, I desperately desired to have a different experience of my experience yet was at a loss as to how to achieve this.

It was then, in the fall of 2005, I happened upon a form of Japanese self-reflection called Naikan, literally, "seeing within" (Krech, 2002). Naikan therapy, as traditionally practiced, asks one to reflect upon three simple questions. What have I received? What have I given? How have I caused difficulty for others? The first question asks us to see and acknowledge how we have benefited from the actions of others. It asks us to become aware of all the ways that people in particular and the Universe in general support and nurture us in small and not so small ways each and every day. The second question, then, asks us to reflect upon how we have or have not responded in kind. Finally, the third question demands from us a rigorous self-examination as we

hold ourselves accountable for all the ways we have invariably acted that have brought pain, suffering, and difficulty for others. The faithful practice of these three questions lay at the heart of Naikan reflection.

It was during this same period of time during my fall semester at UW-Stout that Professor Terri Karis directed me to an article Krech had written on the revolutionary practice of gratitude (Krech, 2004). I had also begun reading Krech's (2002) book *Naikan Reflection: Gratitude, Grace, and the Japanese Art of Self-Reflection* and was becoming slowly intrigued, at least intellectually, by the relationship between attention or mindfulness, gratitude, and the possibility for a deeper acceptance of and satisfaction with life. Indeed, as Krech states in his book, "It is the joy, appreciation, and gratitude that often attract people to Naikan" (p.14). I had always seemed to know, at least intuitively, that there existed a relationship between what one paid attention to and one's emotional state of being. So while this idea was nothing new, it was the way Krech presented it, specifically the relationship between attention and feeling grateful, that seemed to ring a bell for me. I knew that whatever my existential malaise consisted of, it had something to do with wanting to be a more grateful, a more thankful, and a more appreciative person.

My hopeful curiosity soon got the best of me and, following Krech's advice, I began focusing on what was working in my life and going right as opposed to what I was dissatisfied with and what was going wrong. While not expecting the heavens to be opened, I had a budding hope that maybe I'd just feel better inside. So I decided to commence what could only be described as a gratitude practice. Every morning I began my quiet time with a mental listing of ten things that were working in my life: ten things for which I was thankful. I also began reading books on the value of appreciation, on mindfulness, on living in the present, and on learning how

to accept and value what I did have in my life instead of wishing things would be always somehow different. In short, I made a decision, on some level, that I wanted to learn how to live my life from a center of gratitude and appreciation. It was my hope that somehow, if I succeeded, my life might change, and I might become more peaceful and content human being. At least that was my hope.

So this little personal and fragmentary experiment in trying to simply feel better eventually coalesced into this present research project. Therefore, what the reader will be receiving in these pages is part theoretical and part experiential. Theoretically, this project seeks to answer the question as to what, if any, is the relationship between the practice of Naikan reflection, gratitude, and emotional and mental well-being. Because Naikan philosophy and practice are so closely associated with the concept of gratitude, and due to the fact that most of the existent literature on Naikan therapy is in Japanese, Chapter 2 will be a review of the research literature in English on the relationship between gratitude and emotional well-being.

Chapter Three will then present the rationale for the experiential methodological choice I made for this project and paper: a qualitative research approach termed autoethnography. As stated earlier, this entire project began initially as a highly personal search of an existential, almost spiritual, nature. I wanted to continue this exploration on the relationship between Naikan reflection, gratitude, and subjective well-being in a more systematic and rigorous way. I wanted to explore, within the contours of my daily routine, what shifts might happen within my psyche if I subjected myself to a month long exposure of Naikan practice. Furthermore, as a counselor in training, I was also concerned that if I were to ever offer Naikan reflection as a counseling approach, as a matter of integrity I would want to have experienced the process firsthand, both in terms of its drawbacks and benefits.

To this end, Greg Krech of the Todo Institute opened up for me, free of charge, the online distance learning program of Naikan Reflection: a structured thirty day reflection consisting of various readings, reflection exercises and activities designed to immerse one into the spirit of Naikan practice. Chapter Three thus outlines the research methodology I employed for this project, that of autoethnography, the data collection procedures, and the justification for this approach. Chapter Four, in a narrative fashion, presents the results of my research. Chapter Five is a discussion of the results in terms of what I have learned about the relationship between Naikan practice, gratitude, and emotional well-being.

Naikan Reflection: A Brief Introduction

It was a Japanese businessman named Ishin Yoshimoto who in the 1940's popularized Naikan therapy (Krech, 2002). Naikan was originally a rigorous form of meditation, called *mishirabe*, rooted in the spiritual tradition of the Buddhist Pure Land sect. Yoshimoto believed that the benefits of Naikan should be available to the masses and he thus adapted a form of the meditation for the general populace. Today, there are approximately 40 Naikan meditation centers in Japan. Naikan therapy is employed in a variety of settings such as mental health counseling centers, addiction treatment, penal institutions, businesses and schools.

It was an American by the name of David K. Reynolds who was responsible for first introducing Naikan reflection into North America (Krech, 2002). Reynolds is responsible for developing the Constructive Living Movement which incorporates both Naikan and Morita therapies into its therapeutic approach. Gregg Krech, himself a student of Reynolds, later founded the Todo Institute in Vermont. The Todo Institute actively promotes a form of Naikan reflection specifically adapted for modern American culture. According to its own website, the purpose of the Institute is to “create personal and family change through: the skillful use of

attention, the cultivation of gratitude, the awareness of interdependence, the ability to put oneself in another's shoes, and purposeful action in the face of obstacles" (www.todoinstitute.org).

Naikan Practice and Theory

According to Hedstrom (1994), a typical Naikan retreat lasts approximately one week. The retreatant or *naikansha*, after an initial orientation, is sequestered behind a folding screen, seated on a cushion, facing a blank white wall. The *naikansha* is instructed to meditate upon three questions that can be summarized as follows: (1) What have I received from others? (2) What have I returned or given back to others? (3) What difficulties have I caused others? Using these three questions as a guide, the retreatant is instructed to meditate upon specific life periods focusing upon a particular relationship or theme.

For example, the first theme a *naikansha* will typically reflect upon is his or her relationship with the mother or "amae" during specific periods of time: birth to age nine, ten to nineteen, etc. up until the present. The retreatant will then meet with his teacher or *sensei* for daily interviews called *mensetsus*. During the interviews, the *sensei* rarely asks questions. His role is generally that of one who receptively and encouragingly listens to the results of the *naikansha*'s reflections.

Reynolds (1977) offers an interesting first hand account of his own traditional Naikan retreat, the difficulties he encountered, and the results of his process. His encounter with the first stage of Naikan reflection consisted in simply encountering difficulties in concentration as he tried to recall memories of his past. He also often doubted the veracity of those memories. Reynolds further recounts the bitter and angry feelings he experienced as ancient but painful memories began to emerge. However, Reynolds later attests, these initial feelings were soon

replaced by guilt, regret, and sorrow as his reflection began to unearth long hidden attitudes of selfishness, entitlement, and ungratefulness.

The second stage of traditional Naikan reflection is the stage where the naikansha is continually reassured by the sensei that, despite his selfishness, he has been loved and cared for by others. Upon this realization, the client usually experiences a third moment, a deep joy that stimulates within him profound gratitude and a desire to serve. Reynolds (1977) writes that “The client alternately compares his deeds and attitudes with his perceptions of other’s deeds and attitudes, and finds himself relatively wanting in human virtue. This realization results in a self-directed depressive response from which the only escape is seen to be other-directed acts of service” (p. 253). Thus, according to Reynolds’s account, at the core of traditional Naikan reflection can be found the following sequence: intense reflection upon the three questions, insight, a sense of indebtedness, the emergence of gratitude, and a consequential decision to shift from a pre-occupation with the self to a deeper attentiveness and appreciation for others and the external environment.

The three questions that the Naikan practitioner engages during the course of his or her reflection are designed to induce within the naikansha a fundamental cognitive and emotional shift (Reynolds, 1977). Hedstrom (1994) also points out that “Symptom reduction is basically a by-product of cognitive restructuring and changed life-patterns” (p. 159). And of what does this cognitive restructuring consist? It is a movement away from preoccupation with one’s inner drama and external blame, to an external focus that recognizes ones interdependency with others and keener appreciation and gratefulness for help and benefits received (Krech, 2004).

Emphasizing as it does how we continually benefit from the presence of others in our lives, Naikan challenges us to acknowledge that even our meanest of achievements are never

accomplished alone (Krech, 2002). A healthy and fruitful human life consists in the acknowledgement of its continued interdependency upon others. The problem is, however, that as we mature we seem to develop a sense of entitlement both in our relations with others and to the material universe at large. Our relationship towards others and the world becomes increasingly colored by a pragmatic functionalism. It is this forgetfulness and inattentiveness to our indebtedness to others, as well as an increasing egocentric and functional approach in our relationship to both the both human and non-human world, which results in an unconscious, ungrateful, and unappreciative response to Life.

Naikan reflection encourages us, in an act of honesty and truth, to re-envision both our past and our present in terms of not only the support we have been given, but also in light of the fact that we have made choices that have negatively impacted the lives of those around us. As we become more conscious of the “giftedness” of our existence, our interdependency with others, and our responsibility for our actions, we experience a profound sense of appreciation and gratitude for our lives. What Reynolds came to realize was that for all the guilt or regret Naikan reflection may have stimulated within him, it was ultimately a sense of gratitude for and towards life that emerged as his predominant response. Reynolds (1977) writes that:

The strong glow of gratitude towards others, even strangers, lasted for a few days. I wrote a number of letters to family and friends who meant much to me, thanking them for the contributions to my life.... a naikan perspective...provided me with another reference point to gain perspective on the element of egocentric individualism in western man. (p. 262)

It is this experienced relationship between the consistent practice of Naikan reflection and the emergence of gratitude within the individual with which this project is concerned.

CHAPTER TWO

Naikan Reflection: Gratitude and Healing

This chapter will be a review of the current research on the nature of gratitude and the healing effects upon the human psyche of a grateful response to life. The choice to review the research literature on gratitude was done for three reasons. First, most of the contemporary literature on Naikan therapy *per se* is not available in English. Secondly, given Naikan's emphasis upon gratitude, appreciation and joy, reviewing the scholarly literature on gratitude in relationship to Naikan practice is highly desirable. Thirdly, given my own initial experiment with gratitude practice last fall, and now in this present project as I engage in a conscious and deliberate gratefulness practice, I have begun to recognize at least a *prima facie* correlation between what the research shows as to the impact of gratitude upon the human psyche and the practice of Naikan reflection for human well-being (Emmons & McCullough, 2004; Fredrickson, 1998; Krech, 2002). Finally, while this literature review is by no means exhaustive, it is representative of the most current research on the nature and therapeutic benefits of gratitude.

Gratitude: The Psychological Approach

Emmons and Shelton (2002) note that psychologists have, by in large, ignored the study of gratitude even though it is a commonly occurring affect. Gratitude rarely occurs in the emotion lexicon (Shaver, Schwartz, Kirson, & O'Connor, 1987) nor does it appear in the index of the Handbook of Emotions (Lewis & Haviland-Jones, 2000), and not at all in the Encyclopedia of Human Emotions (Levinson, Ponzetti, & Jorgensen, 1999). Emmons attributes this lapse of reference to gratitude to the ambiguity and uncertainty concerning its status as an emotion.

Appraisal theories posit that emotions are the outcomes of event-related judgments. Weiner's (1985) attribution model emphasizes causal appraisals about events as the main determinants of emotional responses (as cited in Emmons & Shelton, 2002). In this theory, there are two sets of emotions: outcome-dependent and attribution-dependent. Affective reactions such as happiness and unhappiness are outcome dependent, whereas secondary emotional reactions such as pride, anger, or gratitude follow specific patterns of causality. In this framework, attributions to another for a pleasant outcome elicit gratitude.

It was Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1987) who introduced a goal based model of appraisal where the consequences of events are appraised for their relevance to one's on-going goal pursuits (as cited in Emmons & Shelton, 2002). Representational systems such as goals, standards (oughts), and attitudes mediate between objective events and attendant emotional reactions. Also, there are three associated variables that impact the intensity of the felt emotion. These include the desirability of the event, the praiseworthiness or blameworthiness of the agent, and how appealing or attractive this event is in the recipient's eyes. In this framework, gratitude consists of approving of someone else's praiseworthy actions and feeling joy for the desirability of the outcome. Emmons and Shelton note that the main contribution of this model is that it specifies conditions under which gratitude is likely or unlikely to occur.

A final appraisal theory, that of Lazarus and Lazarus (1994), places gratitude in the class of empathic emotions, such as compassion, because it depends upon the capacity to empathize with others (as cited in Emmons and Shelton, 2002). Each emotion is connected to a particular dramatic plot which defines what is happening to the person and its significance for the person's well-being. For Lazarus, the context of gratitude is the realm of interpersonal transactions where

the personal meaning persons attach to giving and receiving influence their experience of gratitude. Thus, the dramatic plot for gratitude is the appreciation of an altruistic gift.

Gratitude: A Relational Event

The literature also discusses the concept of gratitude within the relational and interpersonal realms. One of the earliest conceptualizations of gratitude as a relational event was in the work of the social psychologist, Fritz Heiden (1958). Heiden saw gratitude as a response that a person has when they receive a benefit from one they perceive as having a benevolent intention (as cited in Emmons & Shelton, 2002). At its core gratitude was conceived of as an empathic emotion, freely offered, even if it entailed undergoing some hardship.

More recently, Robert C. Roberts, in his article, “The Blessings of Gratitude” (2004), argues that gratitude must be understood as a relational virtue. Gratitude is a disposition of character that allows one to feel and express the emotion of thankfulness across situations and over time and to do so appropriately. Here, Roberts echoes Aristotle’s statement that gratitude can only be recognized when it is expressed to the right person, at the right time, in the appropriate way. Roberts envisions gratitude as a response to a perceived benevolence and a willingness to remain indebted to another, as in the case where one receives and appreciates a gift that cannot be repaid.

Furthermore, Roberts (2004) suggests that gratitude can only occur phenomenologically within a tripartite schema of relationality. Such a relational schema is comprised of (a) the benefactor (the one who gives), (b) the *beneficiary* (the one who receives the perceived benefit), and (c) the *benefice* (that which is received as a benefit). The grateful person recognizes that he or she is the recipient of someone else’s generosity and his or her gratitude is a response to a perceived, intentional benevolence which in some manner places the beneficiary in a state of

indebtedness. As shall be seen, such an understanding of gratitude comes to pose a challenge for those personality types, such as the narcissist, who cannot countenance interdependency much less a feeling of indebted gratitude.

Finally, in a more recent work, M.E. McCullough (McCullough, 2004) has sought to demonstrate that gratitude is a moral and pro-social emotion which functions in the following manner. First, gratitude acts a *moral barometer*. By this term McCullough suggests that the presence of gratitude within an individual indicates a particular type of interpersonal interaction, “one in which a benefactor contributes to the beneficiary’s perceived well-being through some tangible or intangible benefit” (p. 125). Here McCullough agrees with Robert’s tripartite conceptualization of the gratitude phenomenon insofar as it is an (a) emotional response to (b) having received benefits from (c) one who rendered such benefits intentionally. In other words, for McCullough, to experience gratitude one must not only see the gift as beneficial but also know that the giver gave such a gift with a willful and deliberate intent to benefit the recipient.

Secondly, gratitude acts as a *moral motive*. Gratitude, as the affective response to a perceived benefit, encourages the individual to respond prosocially and to behave morally. In this sense, a grateful response orients the individual toward the other in such a manner that creates and sustains community. Here relationships are created and the social bonds between persons reciprocally developed.

Thirdly and finally, gratitude is a *moral reinforcer*. McCullough suggests that it is intuitively evident that to respond to life with gratitude or to another individual specifically from a posture of gratefulness is to *de facto* respond in a manner that reinforces benevolent actions between the parties. Gratitude, in strengthening the bonds of reciprocity and mutuality, insures

that future acts of benevolence will occur. Gratefulness becomes a force for the social good, a self-perpetuating and on-going event.

Gratitude: An Emotional Response to Life

R.A. Emmons (2002) writes that gratitude can be understood as an emotional response to life that recognizes the giftedness and graciousness of experience pure and simple. The Latin root of gratitude, that of *gratia*, meaning grace, graciousness, or gratefulness conveys this sense of an individual's affective response to Life in all its benevolent gratuitousness. The affective grateful response is a "felt sense of wonder, thankfulness, and appreciation for life. Gratitude can be expressed towards others as well as toward impersonal (nature) or non-human sources (God, animals)" (Emmons, 2002, p. 460). On a personal note, I can personally endorse this latter expression of thanks: How many times have I thanked my cats for making me laugh in their odd and entertaining ways? And how often do I speak to my '97 Monte Carlo, for all its 150,000 miles, thanking her for that engine that just seems to keep on running.

This emphasis upon the affective quality of gratitude is also a hallmark of the great religious traditions. Whether in the Hebrew "Shema," the Catholic Eucharistic prayer of thanksgiving, the Hindu kirtan, or the Sura 14 of the Koran: "If you are grateful, I will give you more," worship, praise, and thanks are given to God for blessings bestowed or simply because of the individual believer's experience of wonder and awe in the face creation itself. At the core of much of the world's religious and mystical experience is the recognition that at the heart of Being and behind the veil of the Everyday, resides mystery, mercy, and a gracious benevolence. Such an expression of gratitude recognizes the wonder and awe as captured in Heidegger's simple and eloquent question as to why there is something at all, rather than nothing (Heidegger, 1929).

It is precisely this capacity for gratitude and its accompanying emotions that Maslow (1970) saw as the hallmark of the self-actualized individual. Self-actualizers, wrote Maslow, have the capacity to “appreciate again and again, freshly and naively, the basic goods of life with awe, pleasure, wonder, and even ecstasy, however stale these experiences may have become to others” (p.163). Maslow saw that to live from a stance of gratitude was largely to exist in a state of being that allowed one to freshly experience the everyday in a vital and exuberant fashion.

If a hallmark of the grateful disposition and the experience of gratitude is one of wonder, awe, pleasure, and even, if one is to believe Maslow, ecstasy, then one might be led, as is Brother David-Steindl-Rast (2004) in his article “Gratitude As Thankfulness and as Gratefulness,” to argue that to speak of gratitude is ultimately to speak of “celebration” (p. 283). For Brother David, celebration is essentially a mutuality of “reciprocal giving and receiving” (p. 285). The whole of one’s personality is caught up in a unifying gracious experience when we recognize the gift (through our intellect), acknowledge and embrace it (in an act of volition) and savor and appreciate it (in a rise of emotion).

Steindl-Rast (2004) further distinguishes between “thankfulness” and “gratefulness.” Thankfulness, Brother David argues, occurs on the realm of human social relations when I recognize (intellect) that I have received a gift from another (see Roberts and McCullough above). This thankfulness is what we call personal gratitude. On the other hand, gratefulness is that state of being that recognizes the simple gratuitousness of “being here,” and is that transpersonal response of gratitude to the very act of existing itself. This sense of gratitude, as Brother David sees it, enables us to allow for those moments when we do in fact feel “grateful” for just being alive, yet would be perplexed if pushed to explain the relational aspect of this

phenomena. Here we simply have the mystic's experience of "universal wholeness" that does not yet distinguish between giver, gift, and receiver (p. 286) (see Bhagavad-Gita, 9.16).

Perhaps, however, the most succinct and encompassing exposition of gratitude I have come across is in C.M. Shelton's (2004) "Gratitude: Considerations from a Moral Perspective." In this article, Shelton writes that gratitude is:

An interior depth we experience, which orients us to acknowledge dependence, out of which flows a profound sense of being gifted. This way of being, in turn, elicits humility, just as it nourishes our goodness. As a consequence, when truly grateful, we are led to experience and interpret life situations in ways that call forth from us an openness and engagement with the world through purposeful existence to share and increase the very good we have received. (p.273)

Shelton's definition of gratitude reprises in many ways what has been stated up until this point. In addition to the relational aspect noted in previous authors, what is notable about Shelton's observations about the experience of gratitude is his emphasis upon the affective nature of the experience, which has both a formative and sustaining effect upon the spirit (gratitude both "elicits humility" and "nourishes" our goodness). This effect then, once being born, turns us away from preoccupation with the self (in the sense of an emotional restriction) in a movement of purposive praxis oriented toward the world (in the sense of an emotional openness) as we seek to return that which we have received.

In conclusion, what does contemporary scholarship say about the nature of gratitude? Despite some variation amongst scholars and the real possibility that there exist gradients of gratitude among individual people, I think the following can be safely asserted about the nature of this particular emotion.

First, gratitude possesses cognitive, volitional, and affective qualities. Secondly, gratitude may be seen as both a temporary affective state or an enduring disposition or virtue. Thirdly, gratitude is primarily relational in character. It is a response to an external state of affairs in which the beneficiary receives a benefit from a benefactor whose motivation in bestowing the benefit is perceived as benevolent and intentional. Fourthly, the experience of gratitude and expressions of gratefulness both create and strengthen social bonds. Finally, in addition to the accepted tripartite nature of the phenomena of gratitude, I believe that a strong case can be made for a genuine human expression of gratitude in terms of Maslow's (1970) self-actualizer or Steindl-Rast's (2004) genuine mystical experience of Being. I now turn to a review of the research literature in terms of the relationship between gratitude and human psychological and emotional well-being.

Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being

I first found myself attracted to the practice of gratitude as a path towards discovering a more satisfying and fulfilling way of being-in-the-world. Secondly, as a counselor-in-training, I was (and am) interested in offering to future clients various practices that not only ease their psychic pain but also positively facilitate their ability to create richly meaningful and purposive lives. In what follows, I shall summarize what some selected noted researchers in the field of psychology have discovered in regard to the relationship between how the practice of gratitude does or does not promote human happiness, or, more technically, what is termed subjective well-being.

Watkins (2004), in his article "Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being," suggests that subjective well-being has three qualities. First, it is subjective and, as such, relative to the conscious awareness and valuation of the individual. Secondly, subjective well-being (hereafter

SWB) is not measured merely in terms of the absence of negative features, but is more importantly a measure of the positive features of one's experience. Thirdly, SWB is experienced pervasively across all facets of an individual's experience, personal, professional, emotional, and cognitive, i.e., it is global in nature. Therefore, gratitude as a affective disposition or trait which positively impacts the life of the individual over time can only be meaningfully measured and assessed relative to the individual's subjective experience of gratefulness, both intra- and inter-personally. In other words, subjective well-being refers to what people think and feel about their lives and the cognitive and emotional conclusions they reach when they evaluate their lives (Seligmann & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The Gratitude Research of Emmons and McCullough

Dr. R.A. Emmons is one of the foremost researchers on topic of gratitude. He and colleague Michael E. McCullough engaged in a major study on gratitude, "*Counting Blessings Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life*" (Emmons & McCullough, 2003), in an attempt to measure the positive effects of gratitude practices upon the emotional and physical well-being of college undergraduates. They have recently edited the book, *The Psychology of Gratitude* (Emmons & McCullough, 2004), which has brought together the most current scholarly research on the topic of gratitude. In a more popular work, *Words of Gratitude: For Mind, Body, and Soul*, Emmons (2001) has sought to disseminate the results of his own research and that of others on the therapeutic benefits of gratitude for the general populace. In fact, in this work, Emmons gives a nod to Naikan reflection as an effective practice for cultivating gratitude in one's life.

In Counting Blessing Versus Burdens: An Experimental Investigation of Gratitude and Subjective Well-Being in Daily Life, Emmons and McCullough (2003) attempted to answer the

question what affect being grateful and approaching life from a stance of gratitude would have upon daily life. In this study, undergraduate students were asked, during a ten week time frame, to complete a weekly log of their emotions, physical symptoms, and health behaviors. In addition to filling out the weekly report, the research participants were randomly assigned one of three conditions. One third was asked to simply record one to five major events that most affected them during the week. A second third was asked to record only the significant stressors or hassles that affected them during the week. The final third was asked to record five things in their lives for which they were grateful or thankful.

Emmons and McCullough (2003) reported that the results revealed significant differences between the three groups on the outcome measures. As opposed to the events and hassles group, the students in the gratitude condition felt better about their lives as a whole and were more optimistic about their expectations for the following week. The participants in the thankful group also reported fewer physical complaints than the hassles group and spent more time exercising than the other two groups. Emmons states that this finding suggests that the emotional and mental benefits of a thankful focus are associated with increased feelings of physical vitality. In addition, participants in the gratitude condition seemed to have made more progress on their goals than participants in the other two groups.

A second follow-up study was then conducted to replicate the findings of these mental health benefits associated with a grateful focus (Emmons, 2000). In this particular study, gratitude journals were kept over a period of twenty-days. The participants who kept gratitude logs scored higher on the measures of psychological well-being and were likely to report helping someone with a personal problem or having offered emotional support to another. In addition, scores on an individual difference measure of gratitude were associated with frequency of

engaging in prosocial activities such as volunteering, tutoring, mentoring, etc. What this result suggested was that gratitude induction resulted in not only intrapersonal psychological benefits, but encouraged interpersonal and prosocial interaction as well.

The above studies suggest that a grateful focus on daily basis benefits people both intrapsychically and interpersonally. Another interesting result was that those individuals who were in the gratitude group were not protected from experiencing so-called unpleasant emotions. In fact, Emmons (2001) writes that “persons in the thankful group reported higher levels of the agitation-related emotions (irritability, nervousness, anger) than did people in the other two conditions” (p. 466). Living with a grateful focus does not necessarily involve selectively ignoring or avoiding so-called negative emotions or events in life. In fact, one might speculate that those individuals who begin to consciously focus on their blessings become more attuned and sensitized to the intensity and range of their emotional responses to external stimuli in general, and negative emotional responses in particular. In this respect, beginning a grateful focus practice may become the first step toward increased mindfulness and attentiveness to one’s experience. This result dovetails with the Naikan principle that attending to the whole range of our experience, which includes our blessings, is seeing a truth which in fact leads to greater self-awareness, an increased sense of our social relations, and a keener sense of interpersonal responsiveness and responsibility (Krech, 2002). Gratefulness, appreciation, and joy are the end results of Naikan reflection, a reflection which may reflect back a truth about which we may initially be less than comfortable, but which in the end, sets us free.

Gratitude and Positive Psychology

The current research on gratitude is also closely tied to the recent emergence of the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology and the study of positive human emotions (Emmons

& Shelton, 2001; Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson, 2004; Seligmann & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) emerged out of dissatisfaction with a psychological approach which seemed exclusively concerned with pathology, following the disease model of modern medicine. Against this, positive psychology seeks to delineate those human characteristics and virtues (powers) that constitute excellence in human character, the cultivation of which makes for human happiness and flourishing. In many respects the emergence of positive psychology is a harkening back to the ancient Greek ideal of a virtue based ethic (Aristotle, Plato), which seeks to base human happiness upon the idealization, cultivation, and expression of specific human qualities (e.g. practical wisdom, skillful means, courage, empathy, generosity) that make for a fulfilling human life.

Barbara Fredrickson (Fredrickson, 1998; Fredrickson, 2004), in a major study of the role of positive emotions, including gratitude, states that positive emotions such as joy, contentment, interest, and love, have a “broaden and build effect” within the individual’s emotional and cognitive repertoire. Fredrickson (1998) writes that positive emotions serve to “broaden an individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire, which in turn has the effect of building that individual’s physical, intellectual, and social resources” (p. 300). This cultivation and expression of the positive emotions results in an upward spiral of behavior toward “optimal functioning and enhanced emotional well-being” (Fredrickson, 2004, p.153). Thus for example, one who responds to life with the emotion of joy, broadens her response to life by creating the urge to play, push limits, and be creative. In other words, being joyful builds up and strengthens an individual’s personal resources so that their response to life events becomes more flexible and resilient.

Fredrickson (2004) imagines gratefulness, which she describes as an episodic affective trait, as performing a similar function. Gratitude, like joy, is essentially creative. A grateful response to life encourages development, within the individual, of interpersonal skills that allow for loving and appreciation. As such, gratitude serves a creative social function as people, who in gratefulness recognize being gifted by another in some way, then reciprocate the favor in ways that benefit other people, ways that include but are not limited to the original benefactor. Gratitude can thus be conceptualized as an affective trait which not only transforms the individual but simultaneously builds community and strengthens social bonds.

In another take on Fredrickson's broaden and build theory, Philip Watkins (2004) argues that a grateful response to life is actually a form of cognitive amplification to a perceived positive experience. Watkins argues that through a grateful response, the beneficiary completes the meaning of a benefice in two ways. First, from a cognitive standpoint, gratitude acknowledges the benefit as benevolently, intentionally, and freely given. Secondly, from an emotional standpoint, the beneficiary actually increases his or her enjoyment of the gift in thus being grateful. In perceiving positive events or benefices as completely gifted, the beneficiary *completes* the meaning of the gift and increases his sense of enjoyment through an affective grateful response. The more frequently an individual responds to life in this grateful manner, and directs attention away from what, until that time, may have been perceived social deprivations, and now focuses upon the blessings received, and responds gratefully, this grateful response becomes more frequently and deeply habituated within the emotional and cognitive repertoire of the individual. As this occurs, and as focusing on positive experiences and responding to them in a grateful manner becomes more closely married to the emotional/cognitive perceptual and behavioral schema of the individual, the person begins to

experience in a more proportionately and frequently beneficial way. Gratefulness thus becomes an effective coping mechanism which promotes a broader range of cognitive and emotional responses to life events, both positive and negative, and thus strengthens human resiliency and promotes human happiness and flourishing.

Watkins (2004) writes that gratefulness and human happiness are inextricably intertwined in a recurrent cycle of virtue as they continually reinforce one another. In the grateful response, the individual receives the perceived positive benefit as a gift, which cognitively and emotionally enhances and elaborates the completion of the enjoyment of the gift. The result is a net increase in the amount of subjective happiness and well-being one experiences. This state of happiness then increases and builds upon the individual's capacity to enjoy received benefits, and also to be aware of and interpret positive experiences as benevolently intended gifts. This increased ability to recognize the giftedness of one's existence thus leads to an increase in gratitude. Gratitude and the experience of human flourishing and happiness mutually reinforce one another.

Thus far gratitude and the grateful response, either as a episodic trait or enduring virtue, could be understood as functioning primarily as a moral affect operating within both the intra-psychic and the interpersonal domains. Intra-psychically, gratitude seems to build, broaden, and expand the emotional and cognitive repertoire so as to increase one's ability to interpret life and respond to life events in a more resilient, creative, and positive way. As this process occurs, the individual experiences an increasing freedom viz a viz external circumstances, and is able to multiply and enjoy increased opportunities for human flourishing and happiness (Emmons et. al, 2001; Frederickson, 2004; (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002; Watkins, 2004).

Furthermore, gratitude also functions in a prosocial way by encouraging behaviors that create, develop, and reinforce social and communal bonds (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000;

Emmons & Shelton, 2001; McCullough et.al, 2002). In both of these ways, intrapsychically and interpersonally, the practice of gratitude seems to create, sustain, and promote human psychological and social well-being. What I would like to turn to now are those psychological conditions that militate against a grateful response to life.

How Gratitude Mitigates Malevolent Dispositions

Robert Roberts (2004) in “*The Blessings of Gratitude*” suggests that gratitude contributes to human well-being by mitigating what he calls the vices of envy, regret, and resentment. In terms of resentment, Roberts writes:

It seems unlikely that a person would be very appreciative of the good things that others contribute to his or her own life, strongly sensitive to benevolent motives in people, and quite willingly to be indebted to a wide range of others and at the same time intensely on the lookout for harm to himself or herself, very ready to attribute malevolence and negligence to others, and inclined to bear grudges against those who harm him or her, even in small ways. (p. 69)

The resentful personality perceives others as competitors whose good fortune necessarily detracts and subtracts from his perceived good. In this respect, I see resentment as possessing at its core both fear and anger: fear in that I perceive another’s motives and even good fortune as threat against my own well-being and self-image; anger due to my own inability to control others much less my own ill-perceived destiny.

Gratitude also militates against the disposition to envy. According to Roberts (2004), the phenomenon of envy manifests itself in three ways. First, envy is dissatisfaction with what one possesses. Envy creates in its wake an element of non-acceptance of both oneself and the world in general that is as pervasive as it is subtle. Secondly, envy consists of dissatisfaction with

oneself. Closely tied here to resentment, the envious person cannot accept himself much less others. Because the envious person cannot recognize and accept the good that he is and does experience, he cannot rejoice and affirm the good in others and which they experience. Thirdly and finally, envy perceives things and other persons from an egoistical and self-serving vantage point. The envious person esteems as valuable that person or object which gives him some advantage or competitive edge.

Gratefulness, on the other hand, encourages individuals to be satisfied with what they have in terms of both themselves and their actual possessions. Gratitude teaches one to attend to and appreciate what is working in one's life, the gifts that one does possess, and the benefits one accrues and is continually receiving. As such, the grateful disposition acts as an antidote to such negative and self-destructive emotions as disappointment, regret, and frustration (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000; Krech, 2002).

The envious, resentful, and regret-filled individual could be construed, according to this analysis, as ungrateful. Gratitude by its very nature both sustains an individual's sense of personal goodness while orienting them to a moral horizon toward which they might strive. Indeed, as has been shown, gratitude connects an individual to a wider community and to relational obligations that both include and transcend his or her own personal growth. Conversely, as Emmons and Shelton (2001) note, a life lived from a stance of ungratefulness and ingratitude "leads ineluctably to a confining, restricting, and a shrinking sense of self" (p. 463).

Emmons and Shelton (2001) recognize that an ungrateful person possesses a personality structure which is crippled by narcissism. It is a narcissistic personality, so filled and pre-occupied with a sense of self-importance, which perceives life as an entitlement (Krech, 2002). This keen sense of deserving, having a right to something, or expecting that the world owes one,

isolates the narcissist within the confines of his egotistic spirit and alienates him from healthy communion with others. The narcissist's pseudo-autonomous spirit prevents him from engaging in the respectful reciprocity that characterizes healthy and intimate relationships. Deluded into a false sense of self-sufficiency, the narcissistic personality simply cannot endure to embrace the happy indebtedness that the grateful person knows well.

Conclusion: The Practice of Gratitude and Its Benefits

From the above discussion, the following conclusions might be drawn as to the possible benefits to be derived from following the practice of gratitude. From an internal psychological perspective, the practice of gratitude may serve three functions. First, as I deliberately and consciously take up a gratitude practice, this seems to increase self-awareness in general and move me from a space of internal orientation to a space of externality and other-directedness. I develop a keener awareness of not only my intuitive self but also a more profound sense of presence to the world around me. Secondly, as I focus on life's blessings and responding to those blessings, this seems to increase both my emotional flexibility and resiliency and consequently creates a more profound and enduring sense of subjective well-being and happiness. Gratitude and human happiness build upon and mutually reinforce one another. Finally, the practice of gratitude may be the antidote for overcoming dispositions such as resentment, envy, greed, regret, and narcissism which militate against human happiness and flourishing.

From a social and interpersonal perspective, the practice of gratitude seems to have the following consequences. As I practice gratitude, and to the extent that this focus pushes me away from pre-occupation with the self and toward relationship with the world (both human and non-human), I become more aware of myself as being-in-relation-to-the-world and of my moral responsibility to that world. Secondly, the grateful response seems to be creative and multiplies

ways to return the good I receive, not only to the original benefactor, but to many others as well.

Thirdly, inasmuch as I become aware of myself in relation-to-the-world, and engage in acts of benevolence towards that world, my grateful response creates community and as it does so, transforms it. The world becomes a nicer place.

“We pray for our daily bread.

Bread gives us the strength to do so”

-R.H.Blyth

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

Naikan therapy is an insight oriented reflective practice constellated around three primary questions: A. What have I received from others? B. What have I given to others? C. How have I been an obstacle to others? (Krech, 2002). Inasmuch as I was engaged in this practice for a period of approximately one month, both the process and the results are highly experiential and personal in nature. In other words, this project was one in which the subject and the subject matter, the observer and the observed, were one and the same. Therefore, the methodological approach I employed, in terms of existential and epistemological considerations, had to be consonant with the nature and scope of the project itself. In order to achieve this end, I chose the relatively new methodological approach of autoethnology (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). What follows is a description of this approach: its nature, scope, and relevance for Naikan reflection.

A Comparison: Modern and Post-Modern Research Approaches

Autoethnography is a relatively novel approach to doing research. It emerged out of the postmodern narrative turn in epistemology, a movement which rejected the idea of a privileged observer who could, through the consistent application of the scientific method, derive an unbiased and objective representation of the world (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). In the modern scientific paradigm, the researcher and the subject under investigation are two distinct phenomena with the former striving to describe with clarity and precision the exact nature of the latter. The epistemological and ontological success in this paradigm is measured in terms of the results being verifiable, quantifiable, and universally replicable by other researchers in the same field. Above all else, the researcher, during the course of his investigations, strives to be impersonal and uninvolved so no bias taints the results. Consequently, what is *de facto* excluded

from the investigative process is any hint of the relational, emotive, personal, and subjective aspects of our human experience. In this paradigm real gains in knowledge and in the understanding our world are garnered through a process and subsequently represented in a conclusion that is, in essence, indifferent and irrelevant to the deepest existential and moral aspirations of the human spirit.

Traditional ethnography shared in the assumptions of this modern, scientific, and objectivist approach. Vidich and Lyman (2000) state that in traditional ethnography, the researcher would immerse himself in the field and immerse himself in the culture being observed. Every effort was made to insure that the researcher's own bias, values, and subjectivity would not influence the results of the study. Accurate data in this form of research reflected the actual lived experience of the studied group. Traditional ethnography valued detachment, objectivity, and replicable results.

Opposed to this disembodied form of research, much of postmodern scholarship has embraced an epistemological stance in which the researcher, and in particular the experience of the researcher, becomes part of the research process itself (Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Vidich and Lyman, 2000). Postmodernism has challenged the ability and even the desirability of the researcher to be detached from the study. In the social sciences, both feminist and social constructivist researchers embrace this epistemological shift in which the observer and the observed become inextricably intertwined and constitutive of the investigative process itself. In postmodern feminist and social constructivist theory there is no privileged center, epistemologically or ideologically, from which the researcher can situate him or herself from the subject being investigated. Hence, pure objectivity in research is nothing but a cultural fiction and a chasing after the wind. Postmodernism holds that a more responsible approach for the

researcher is to acknowledge the values and prejudices he or she brings to the study. This cultural and epistemological transparency recognizes the researcher as an active participant and contributor to the investigative process. The nature of knowledge, therefore, far from being unbiased and untainted, becomes inevitably painted as partial, situational, relative, and participatory.

Autoethnography Described

The autoethnographic tradition plants itself squarely in the school of postmodernism. Ellis and Bochner (2000) argue that in the autoethnographic tradition, the researcher's personal story, his values and interests, are legitimate and constitutive elements that shape and define the research process and its conclusions. This allows for the researcher to investigate a phenomenon common to his own group while at the same time honoring his own experience as a member of that group. Autoethnography as a methodology is presented as:

...an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth autoethnographers gaze, first through the ethnographic wide angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 748).

The autoethnographer engages in an experiential dialectical methodology which moves between the inner landscape of his/her felt experience (the *auto*) and his/her external culture-bound situation (the *ethnos*). Richardson (1994b) writes that due to the emphasis upon personal experience, the expression of that experience in autoethnographic texts is displayed in a variety of formats: short stories, poems, fiction, novels, and journals. While the format of the

presentation varies according to the research topic itself and the author's own creative style, the purpose of the approach is the same: the exploration and articulation of one's own unique experience as member of a larger experiencing and expressive community (Davis, 2005).

In employing this particular methodology, it was my intention to write in a meaningful and evocative manner about my experience, both intellectual and emotional, and to honor that experience in a way that can touch the lives of others. My attempt was to be creative yet analytical, thoughtful but writing from the heart. The voice expressed in this project comes from a variety of perspectives. At times I wrote as student, a counselor intern, a white male in his mid-forties, an academic scholarly researcher, as well as the subject of my own research. And while these multiple selves speak as I attempt to convey a richly textured and nuanced description of my experience, this research project was not intended to be a simple exercise in navel-gazing or narcissistic self-indulgence, often a critique of this type of approach (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). As I wrote about my own experience during this month of Naikan reflection, I was also oriented outwardly, toward my culture, and my fellow human beings, in a spirit of care and concern.

What do I mean by care and concern? This research project comes about as a result of my new career orientation as a therapist in training. I want to be a healer. I want to have at my disposal the tools I need to facilitate the healing of others and to promote their spiritual and emotional growth. I have also come to believe, through my own experience and reading, in the possible therapeutic benefits of cultivating the disposition of gratitude in one's life. I have experienced to a small degree how the practice of Naikan reflection may be employed as psycho-spiritual process to encourage the development of a grateful spirit within myself. In short, I have adopted the autoethnographic approach in hope that others, who may one day read this study, may discover a truth that resonates with their own experience, and through their experience of

fellow-feeling and empathic affiliation, perhaps come to a new understanding of their own human-beingness, and a deeper appreciation of the rich fabric that is the tapestry of their own life.

Narrative Truth, Validity, Reliability, and Generalizability

This section addresses how the concepts of narrative truth, validity, reliability, and generalizability can be understood within a qualitative autoethnographic methodology. The question here is: How can a personal and evocative narrative be trustworthy and credible? A secondary but equally important question is: In what sense can such a narrative be true? (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). These are significant questions because the postmodernist in general and the autoethnographic approach in particular admit that, because there is no privileged center from which the researcher can observe the research process and from where he can present its finding (especially when he is the subject himself), the validity, reliability, and the truth claims he can make about his research are limited and partial. How should these concepts be understood, then, when the autoethnographer is not striving to portray with unbiased and detached accuracy the data itself? Ellis and Bochner (2000) state that:

... it necessitates a radical transformation in the goals of our Work--from description to communication--as I see it, the practices of human communication--the negotiation and performance of acts of meaning--should become our model for how we tell about the empirical world...the goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue... The usefulness of these stories is their capacity to inspire conversation from the point of view of the readers, who enter from the perspective of their own lives. The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathetically into worlds of experience different from their own,

and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints encountered. Invited to take the story in and use it for themselves, readers become co-performers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text. (p. 748)

The power and therefore the truth of the text are found in its ability to engage the reader on a variety of levels simultaneously: imaginative, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual. As the reader engages and is engaged by the text, he or she cannot help but become transformed in the process. Notice that the words in the above quote, which describe this process of engagement, are dynamic and dialectical. On one hand the stories inspire, provoke and encourage. On the other hand, the reader broadens his horizons, reflects critically, enters empathetically, actively engages and examines himself. The story engages the reader in a conversation and in the process both are transfigured and transformed: not unlike a Rogerian understanding of the therapeutic process itself.

The truth, therefore, of a narrative text is found not merely in its ability to accurately represent the past, but in its ability to evoke, engage, and challenge the reader's consciousness (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The questions narrative truth responds to are rather more existential and phenomenological in nature. They are questions less concerned with so-called facts than with value and meaning. For example, one such question is: How does my story touch and change the reader? What are the consequences my story produces in and for the reader? Another way to put it might be: How does this written narrative of an actual previously lived experience now touch and become consequential (or not) for the reader? Secondly, how is the reader touched and shaped by the narrative? And thirdly, what new possibilities does this narrative text introduce into the choices the reader now makes in his or her life? In short, as I see it, the truth of

a narrative is measured in its ability to communicate an experience and open up the possibility of *insight* and *conversion* for the reader.

Golafshani (2003) writes that the validity, reliability, generalizability, and truth of the autoethnographic narrative must be understood in terms of the goals of the method itself. For example, the “validity” of a good poem or a religious belief cannot and should not be defined in the same way that one might speak of the validity of a scientific experiment. One might speak similarly of the reliability or generalizability or even the truth of a work of poetry. In other words, terms such as validity, reliability, generalizability, and truth must be configured and defined according to the subject under discussion. The autoethnographic method, also concerned with questions of trustworthiness and credibility, understands these terms in relation to the highly personal, evocative, qualitative, and ethical matters with which it deals.

Thus, Ellis and Bochner (2000) write that the validity of the autoethnographic text seeks “verisimilitude” as it seeks to resonate a feeling of familiarity within the reader (p. 751). It asks whether the story evokes within the reader a feeling that the experience is believable, lifelike, and even possible. Inasmuch as the sharing of my experience gives readers new insights into their own lives or into the lives of others, or enables them to improve their lives or the lives of others in some way, both my story and theirs are validated in an existentially meaningful way.

As far as reliability is concerned, as Ellis and Bochner (2000) point out there is no such thing in autoethnographic research as orthodox reliability as understood in terms of consistency and replicability. In autoethnographic writing, one is creating a personal narrative from a situated location in an attempt to bring coherency and meaning to one’s life tapestry. Reliability as consistency, then, in this approach, can perhaps be best understood in terms of my ability to be

faithful to the project, sincere, and as honest and expressive as possible in conveying the truth of my experience as I have both lived and understood it.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) further argue that the concept of generalizability can be understood in a naturalistic sense where the writer seeks to evoke within the reader a shared experience. Indeed, our own experiences are particular and unique, but because we share with others a common nature, culture or institutions, such generalizations are possible. As Ellis and Bochner point out, a reader is constantly testing the generalizability of a narrative when he asks the question: Does what I am reading resonate with and/or reflect my own felt experience? If it does, then it can speak meaningfully about the reader's experience or about others they know.

My Month of Naikan Reflection: The Autoethnographic Method

I chose the autoethnographic approach for a number of reasons. I did not choose it because I necessarily ascribe to all the ideological and epistemological tenets of postmodernist thinking. I did, however, embrace this method because it seemed suited for the purposes of my project.

First and foremost, I wanted an experience that would personally touch and have some transformative impact upon my life. At this point in my life I simply did not want to gather data and report on it in a purely theoretical manner just so the pages could later gather dust on the shelves: one more thesis for the shadows of history. The autoethnographic method provided for me an effective and intimate methodology that allowed me to share the fruits of a personal and meaningful experience.

Secondly, I did not simply want a therapeutic experience for the sake of the experience itself. What I did want to explore and engage in was a therapeutic process which purports to heal based upon reflection on three ostensibly simple questions: What have others given to me? What

have I given to others? How have I been an obstacle for others? If in fact, as a result of this process, I reaped some significant benefits (increased my self-awareness, became more appreciative of life, loved others more deeply, had greater peace of mind) then this experiment would result in a tangible process I could then offer to future clients who might benefit from Naikan reflection. Hence, if one goal of the autoethnographic method is to engage in an ethic of care and concern (see above), this is how I will have met that goal.

I did not know what would occur during this month long process of reflection. It was, in a real sense, an experiment. What I did hope for was that my journey with and exploration into Naikan reflection would fill out the three questions that circumscribe the nature of narrative truth (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). First, what would be the consequences this journey or story produces, both for myself as the one living and telling the story as well as for anyone who may come upon this text and read it? Secondly, what kind of person will this process have shaped me into: Will I be different, the same, and if so, in what ways? Finally, what new possibilities might this month have introduced into my life? If the end result of this process is valid, reliable, and generalizable (see above) then the reader of this work will have, to some degree, their own experience echoed in my words and, so hopefully, be able to find meaning in the same questions I wondered about myself.

The Month of Naikan Reflection: Content and Process (March 1st thru April 2)

This month of Naikan reflection was based upon an actual online course offered by the Todo Institute in Vermont. The Institute's director, Gregg Krech, graciously made available to me the same resources offered to students when the retreat is held every year in November. I can only be grateful for the help Gregg has given me.

My primary research question was: How or in what ways does the practice of Naikan reflection result in a more profound sense of gratitude toward life and a deeper sense of self-awareness? A secondary question of interest was: What, if any, is the relationship between attention and gratitude in the practice of Naikan reflection? Finally, a tertiary question of interest: In what way, if any, does mindfulness and gratitude contribute to a deeper sense of mental and emotional well-being in the Naikan practitioner?

The following is a description of the actual content and process that constituted the heart of this month of reflection in my attempt to answer the above questions.

First, I established a baseline for the month of reflection. In order to establish some kind of emotional, cognitive, and narrative baseline for this month of reflection, I did two simple things. First, I shared in brief, narrative form how I came to be interested in this project in general and in Naikan specifically. Secondly and prior to beginning the Naikan process on March 1st, I gauged my general level of gratitude, mindfulness, and subjective happiness by taking the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Secondly, each day consisted of a Naikan reflection and/or practice around either the three questions themselves as applied to the day in general or the application of the Naikan questions/principles to a specific area of life. Thus, for example, the reflection for March 1st consisted of a daily 30–40 minute Naikan practice applying the three questions: What have I received from _____? What have I given to _____? How have I been an obstacle to others? However, on March 10th, I applied the three questions to garbage (Garbage Naikan), with an eye toward how wrappers, tissues, and empty cartons of milk have benefited me in some way and how my life may have been different without them.

Thirdly, I reflected upon three readings per week, as drawn from Naikan materials offered through Todo's online distance learning program (www.distancelearning.org), that touch upon a specific principle or practice of Naikan reflection: e.g. gratitude, mindfulness, relationships, or responsibility. Thus, for my first week of Naikan, I included the following articles for my reflection: "Cultivating Gratitude": An Interview with Robert Emmons, Ph.D. (October, 2004); "Exploring the Link between Gratitude and Attention" by Gregg Krech (April, 2003); and "Many Thanks: On the Revolutionary Practice of Gratitude" by Gregg Krech (December, 2004).

Fourthly, though I followed the topic and assignment for the day, I also allowed myself to reflect/express myself spontaneously over a given topic through prose, poetry, and other forms of written expression on a daily basis.

Fifthly, at the end of each week, I returned to the written materials and reflected upon the week's exercises in order to identify feelings, thoughts, phrases, resistances, "aha" moments, or words that seemed to indicate emotional movements or subtle and overt behaviors that described the relationship between dispositions of gratitude and mindfulness to areas of my life.

Sixthly and finally, I engaged in a dialogue with a conversational partner about my experience and sought his input on various relevant and engaging aspects of my weekly experience. I included a written reflection upon this conversation in my Naikan Journal.

At the end of the thirty days, the time of data gathering concluded. At this point in the process, I reviewed and analyzed my written materials to ascertain whether I could identify any predominant themes that may have emerged. Guiding my analysis was my predominant research question: How or in what ways does the practice of Naikan therapy result in a more profound experience of gratitude and appreciation of life and a heightened sense of self-awareness? Also

guiding the organization and evaluation of my data were my two subsidiary research questions: What (if any) is the relationship between mindfulness and gratitude as cultivated in Naikan reflection? And: In what way (if any) does mindfulness and gratitude contribute to a deeper sense of mental and emotional well-being in the Naikan practitioner?

First, any inner shifts in gratitude, mindfulness, and general happiness were evaluated through retaking the Subjective Happiness Scale (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (Lyubormirsky & Lepper, 1999). The results were then measured against the pre-Naikan reflection test ratings.

Secondly, I followed, in general, Creswell's (2002) recommendations for data analysis with a qualitative study:

Step One: I organized and prepared the data for analysis. This involved typing up field notes and/or sorting and arranging the data into different types depending on the sources of information.

Step Two: I read through the data to obtain a general sense of the whole and the meaning of the texts. At this stage I identified predominant themes and ideas. Also, I tried to be sensitive to the tone of the ideas. What was the overall depth, credibility, and use of the information?

Step Three: I began a detailed analysis of the material with a coding process. For example, I first proceeded to identify and separate out particular behaviors, beliefs, and emotions such as being angry, feeling warm or loving, being resentful, acting selfishly or unselfishly, or being quite mindful or as equally inattentive. I next divided these particular beliefs, actions, and emotions into more general categories that I labeled Beliefs, Behaviors, and Emotions. The method here was an inductive process, moving from the particular to the more general or

universal. After I performed this process, I collapsed different particular examples in each category to make the number more manageable.

Step Four: I then employed the coding process to generate a small number of themes or categories from the data. For example, particular behaviors or beliefs gave rise to such themes as Entitlement, Inattention, Resentment, or Judgment. It was at this point that I began identifying possible thematic interrelationships, e.g. such as how entitlement beliefs mitigated against gratitude and mindfulness.

Step Five: I discussed, in narrative form, the findings of the analysis.

Step Six: Finally, I presented an interpretation of the data. What did I learn from this experience? What lessons were presented to me? Finally, in keeping with the autoethnographic narrative methodology, I couched the results of my research within the framework of the three principles of narrative truth: What did I see as the consequences this journey had or will have for my life? How has this process shaped me or changed me, if at all? And finally, what new possibilities for living have been introduced into my life as a result of this month of Naikan reflection (Ellis and Bochner, 2000)?

*It seems to be a law of life that we enrich
ourselves most when we give ourselves
most freely and fully"*

-David Dunn

CHAPTER FOUR

My Month of Naikan Reflection: Presentation of Conclusions

I would like to begin this section with a short excerpt from a story Gregg Krech (2002) narrates in his book on Naikan therapy. In this story, Krech recalls a dinner conversation he had with a friend named Cathy. Throughout the dinner, his friend, who is obviously unhappy, shares a tale of disappointments and frustrations:

Each day she searches for her image of the ideal. Each day she focuses her attention on how each day fails to meet her image of the ideal. She has mastered the recipe for depression and disappointment. She has discovered a guaranteed formula for suffering. Over the years she has trained her mind to focus on the gap between her ideal of the world and her reality. Her mind has graduated with honors... So Cathy suffers as each day brings her more disillusionment. With every story her mind reaches out for sympathy. But the sympathy others offer her pales in comparison with the ideal of the sympathy she wants. (p. 37)

This brief snippet from Krech's fine book on Naikan reflection was offered for two reasons: one in regard to the content of my project and another in regard to its method. First, I recognize in Cathy's struggle reflections of my own. This character's approach to life, as real and familiar as it was unconscious and constricted, reminded me powerfully of why I undertook this project in the first place. Dissatisfied with my own way of being-in-the-world, I set out to discover what kind of person I might begin to become or what I might learn about myself after having exposed myself to a month of Naikan reflection. I knew that the idea of becoming a more grateful, appreciative, and peaceful person seemed intuitively appealing. Whether this would happen, and if it did, what form it would take, was a significant question I was seeking to answer.

Secondly, I began this chapter with a narrative quote so as to remind the reader of the methodological nature of this research project, which is that of a qualitative autoethnographic report. I lived an experience of thirty days in my everyday work-a-day world as counselor-in-training while attempting to be faithful, as much as possible, to the Naikan reflection practice I had imposed upon myself. For the greater part of those thirty days I succeeded in being faithful to the letter of the schedule.

Even though I did follow the reflection format to the letter on most of the days, a number of times, due to circumstances beyond my control, I was unable to maintain my discipline. Thus, for example, a late meeting at work would preclude engaging in a particular Naikan reflection for that evening. Or, due to work and classes, I would have to collapse two Naikan practices over the weekend that I would have otherwise done on two consecutive days during the week. A third breakdown in the plan played out when the friend I had decided to share my weekly reflections with decided to go out to California on a trip. As a result, only two feedback sessions occurred and not the original four. Consequently, due to such interruptions, I did not actually conclude the month of reflection until April 2, and not on March 31 as I had originally planned.

Finally, there were a few Naikan exercises that I simply did not do, such as calculating the amount of money my parents had spent on me since I was born (March 17), because I considered the exercise too tedious or so abstract in nature I felt it irrelevant for my purposes. Another exercise I did not do was the Eulogy exercise (March 29), because I could not obtain clarification on the nature of the exercise from Mr. Krech. On the days I did not do the assigned exercise, I instead performed the traditional daily Naikan practice. I share these observations here for purposes of openness and honesty regarding what might be considered an inherent difficulty of this kind of research, impacting both the process and the result.

Finally, there are a few other methodological considerations that should be noted before I proceed to an exposition of the data (i.e., what I learned about myself). First, such a project as this contains various “layers” of narrative reality and, as such, truth: layers that, ultimately, influence the validity and reliability of the conclusions for this project. For example, even before I conceived of researching Naikan reflection, I was already interested in and favorably disposed to the idea of gratitude and its possible relationship to happiness and mental health. Secondly, what I offer below as “conclusions” should not, in any sense, be taken as a final result. Such conclusions are merely a type of “snapshot” taken within a living, dynamic, and occurrent reality of the interplay of past, present, and future. Thirdly, such conclusions are also abstractions of what was a living experience during the project’s thirty days, now being reflected upon and ordered as I turned my attention to the thirty-five pages of “text” which point toward my experience during those days. In other words, the conclusions presented below are thematic and abstract crystallizations of what was and continues to be a living, fluid process. Even the process of writing this now, in an attempt to present an ordered and meaningful narrative, involves a dynamic interplay of memory, the texts themselves, and who I am now as I creatively interpret the meaning of these texts in light of who I was (past), who I am now (present) and who I am becoming (as being called into the future).

Consequently, I have offered the fruits of this exploration into Naikan reflection in threefold fashion, and followed the suggestion Ellis and Bochner (2000) make concerning the unfolding of truth in the narrative process. First, I have addressed what I see as the most significant consequence of this exploration over the past thirty days in terms of both myself and others. Secondly, I have also addressed a second issue, namely, what kind of person has this process shaped me into: am I different, the same, and if so, in what ways? Finally, as a result of

my month long Naikan reflection, I have asked myself what new possibilities, if any, have been introduced into my life. And as I have stated earlier in this paper, if the end result of this process is valid, reliable, and generalizable, then the reader of this text, within the contours of their own temperament and experiences, will hear an echo and see a reflection of their own humanity in my words, and perhaps, even if only in a small way, find themselves touched and changed.

My Month of Naikan Reflection: Consequences for Myself and Others

There are two fundamental principles underlying Naikan reflection (Krech, 2002). The first principle is that we need to begin attending to the limitless compassion bestowed upon us by life -- that in so many ways, both large and small, our lives are constantly supported and nurtured even when we seemingly do nothing to deserve it. The essence of this first principle is captured in the Naikan reflection question: What have I received from others? The second principle, then, simply asks us to acknowledge the inherent self-centeredness that permeates both our actions and our thoughts. The essence of this second principle is nicely captured in the two other Naikan questions: What have I given to others? How have I caused difficulty to others?

The first principle encourages us to recognize the giftedness of our lives and moves us toward gratitude and appreciation. The second principle pulls us into a more uncomfortable direction as we are invited to examine the state of our own souls and how the condition of that soul affects the lives of other people in particular and the world in general. It was the power of this second principle that impacted me quite profoundly.

An intention I now set for myself every morning is that my thoughts, words, and deeds may contribute so that those that I meet may walk away from our encounter, blessed in some small way. If Naikan reflection has held one profound consequence for me and, as a result, for others, it has enabled me to see how my own selfishness has caused and continues to cause

suffering, harm, or just simply difficulty for other beings. This is the essence of the third question. This question has challenged me to ask myself what it would be like to live with me, to put up with me, and to endure, if not love, my eccentricities, idiosyncrasies, and selfishness. The third question challenged me to truly place myself in the shoes of the Other and to inhabit and try to imagine and feel their experience of me.

Noticing the difficulties I caused others, in ways both large and small, began in first paying attention to my own so-called sufferings and frustrations during the course of a day. What I began to notice was that much of my own perceived daily emotional suffering had less to do with others than it had to do with my own lack of planning, foresight, and mindfulness. While it is always easier to blame another, a policy, or an institution for the painful frustrations or inconveniences one experiences, what I discovered was that it was nonetheless my own inattention to detail as to what were rightfully *my* own responsibilities, that later inevitably caused me pain. And yet, the third question pushed me to see this is not simply about me. My own lack of attention to be responsible for the details of my life inconveniences other persons who must now take time to clean up my mess, as it were, as my irresponsibility, inattention, and carelessness adds a burden now to their daily routine.

Furthermore, as I dug deeper, I began to see that beneath this inattention and abnegation of responsibility lay a hidden but very real narcissistic streak accompanied by a keen sense of entitlement. I became aware of:

...how my own lack of attentiveness, planning, and foresight results in others having to pick up the pieces after me. It is almost as if my own sense of entitlement to be spacey or unconcerned takes precedence over the future energy others will have to spend on fixing

my problems...I seem to assume that others will do for me what I should have done for myself from the beginning...(March 5, 2006).

I began to realize, through this at times painful process of Naikan reflection, the presence of a profound and pervasive belief within myself that I was somehow different from my fellow human beings. This belief, operating usually just below my field of awareness, permitted me to exclude myself from the same mundane and ordinary obligations that simply come with being a social creature. My felt “specialness,” often assuming a form of a grandiose condescension or patronizing superiority, granted me permission to exempt myself from following the rules that govern everyone that seeks to live in common fellowship. Subsequently, when my lack of concern over the details of living delivered me to trouble or when others failed to recognize my specialness or the exemption I was due (I am being a bit facetious here), I gave little heed to the undue burden I placed upon others; I expected them to either save me from my own irresponsibility or, at the very least, spend their time listening to my justifiable complaint about the unfairness of the Universe or the difficulty of just being me. In short, I came to recognize that in some ways I am a very spoiled brat.

As I look over the thematic coding that I did on the thirty-five pages of text from that month, the same words continue to jump out at me: entitlement, envy, non-acceptance, judgment, anger, resentment. In fact, I have since become quite sensitized to how these words and the concepts they designate have operated and continue to operate in my life. Like when I found myself writing the following:

Why do I think that people owe me anything? That the world owes me something? Why do I fool myself into believing that I can or should be able to avoid doing what other people have to do in order to make it? Whether this is taking a job to pay off bills or

working to get through school. Why should I expect the Universe to provide for me through some sort of miracle other than me having to buckle down and work for it?

(March 22, 2006)

I am entitled when I believe that my experiences are to only be of a certain kind, in company with people of a certain ilk, within the context of a lifestyle that assumes that the world owes me in some fundamental fashion. Indeed, in my past I came to believe that I am different, special, and thus somehow excluded from the obligations of the Ordinary. I envy by wishing my circumstances were other than what they are, and as I do this, I simply cannot be grateful because I cannot accept that which is before me. I then become angry and resentful, like Cathy in the story, always setting myself up for disappointment, pain, and frustration, as my expectations and demands exceed the given reality. When I come to this place in my mind, I find nothing but:

Resentment. Wanting more money. Desiring a girlfriend. Scared of the future. Getting down on myself because I will be forty seven years old in June and I have no children, no savings, no good job. Not wanting things to be the way they are. Not accepting things as they are. I am wondering what I am doing with my life. At times I feel incredibly lonely and I become angry because my friends never seem to call me. I feel that I could die one day and no one would even find out until my body started to rot and putrefy. And what of my cats? Would they starve? Or would someone through a great fortunate accident find them before they wasted away? When these thoughts begin to go through my head, all feelings of being grateful, of being thankful seem to fade away. It is then that I wish that my life would have gone differently, that I would have made different choices. If only I could have made different choices. (March 18, 2006)

My thoughts become filled with self-pity and regret. I judge others with a critical eye, as I attempt to justify and prop up my fragile and insecure ego within a world I perceive as frightening and at times overwhelming in the demands it makes upon me. These are the times I just want to run away.

Staring at these words now on the computer screen, they stare back at me and seem to pass judgment on my life. Entitlement, Resentment, Envy, Judgment: code words that have colored a way-of-being-in-the-world that is cold, lonely, jagged, rough, frightening, a veritable desert of emotional deprivation:

How many relationships might have worked out for me if only I had been content with my life...accepting of the goodness and beauty that was laid before me? It was this dissatisfaction and discontent which in many ways dictated the direction and nature of my behavior: lack of gratitude...lack of attention...dwelling on the discontent, the not-going-right and the wanting of what is not there. (March 8, 2006)

How many people have I hurt, how many relationships have come to ruin, because I simply could not accept what was being offered to me in the present moment? How many people have I pushed away or simply let drop by the wayside, people who would have otherwise been my friends, because deep down I felt they had nothing worthwhile to offer me? With a haunting recognition I have come to recognize my tendency to weigh relationships with an eye towards what they might give me or how they might benefit me. Then when my need is either filled or satiation morphs into indifference and boredom, I seem to walk or simply drift away.

So then, I ask myself, where is there room for genuine compassion for others, human warmth and fellow-feeling? Where do I find room to be genuinely compassionate towards myself? I am so wrapped up, so focused on my own needs and wants, dancing alone with myself

within my own little drama. No, the room is very small indeed, with just enough space for me, myself, and I. Dante did well, I suppose, when he placed Lucifer in the center ring of Hell, not suffering amidst the companionship of his fallen minions, but encased in ice, frozen in abysmal isolation.

In sum, I have become aware that to the degree that the flashlight of my attention is not on the present, I fail to take responsibility for my own life. When I do not take responsibility for my own life, then someone else eventually does. And whether they do so out of obligation or out of compassion, it matters little. My thoughtlessness has added an unnecessary burden upon them. This preoccupation with my “self” leads only to attending to my own inner drama, and as a result, my own capacity for extending myself in compassion and service towards others becomes crippled and diminished.

In this regard, my month of Naikan reflection has led me to two conclusions in regard to consequences for myself and for others. First, I have become more profoundly aware of and sensitized to the selfishness within my thoughts and motives. Though I must admit to being somewhat aware before I began this process of an underlying attitude of entitlement toward the world and small narcissistic streak within me, I was not aware of its depth and breadth, much less how it operated in my life and has been cause for so much frustration for myself and others.

Secondly, I have come to realize to what great extent my narcissistic pre-occupation with my own stuff actually inhibits my ability to be present and responsive not only to what is in my own best interests but to the welfare and interests of others. To the extent I begin to be present to my own life and how that life is connected to the well-being or suffering of others, I can make choices to live from a more Other-centered and thus more compassionate point of view.

My Month of Naikan Reflection: How Have I been shaped? How Am I Different?

Before I began writing this section, I began my day with a gratitude practice. After my alarm goes off at four am, I feed my cats, turn on my computer, and go straight to my “meditation” chair in the living room armed with a strong, hot black cup of coffee. There, sitting in the dark, I begin my gratitude practice of naming at least ten things for which I am grateful and that are going right in my life: “Thank you for the coffee in my cup that wakes me up. Thank you for the alarm going off on time. Thank you for my cats who make me laugh and give me companionship. Thank you for my car which keeps running.” I also keep a small gratitude journal in which I now, on a daily or semi-daily basis, record the blessings in my life. And now before I go to bed, before slumber falls upon me, I give thanks for all that went well with me that day. I must say that never before in my life, in such a consistent and systematic way, have I consciously engaged in the practice of directing my attention to the blessings in my life.

Gregg Krech (2002) writes that the intellect alone is not capable of guiding us to a life of gratitude and appreciation. It is not enough to know that focusing on things that are pure, good, and beautiful (St. Paul, Letter to the Philippians, 4:8, English Standard Version) leads to gratitude and appreciation, but “the practice of attention and reflection allows us to begin the journey” (p. 43). And what I have discovered is that the road to living a life of gratefulness and appreciation is not simply a matter of repeating positive affirmations or conjuring up grateful feelings, but rather it is a way of seeing -- of perceiving the countless ways in which we are blessed and supported as we go about our daily lives. It is a daily discipline whereby one consciously and deliberately chooses to focus upon all that is working in one’s life, both big and small. In many respects it is learning to see that being “blessed” is not just winning the lottery or getting the big raise, but is more in redeeming the significance of the “trivial” in one’s life.

Take, for example, a few of the “thank-you’s” I listed above. For many years I just took for granted that my alarm would go off on time and that the coffeemaker would work in the morning. But because I had become so habituated by my expectation that my alarm would go off or that my coffeemaker would work, I became numbed to the real gift these little devices afforded me. Numbed, that is, until they didn’t work. For when that alarm doesn’t go off and I am now late for work, or when the coffeemaker fails to function and I am forced to blare my way through the morning fog unmedicated by my caffeine, the routine working and dependable blessedness of these little devices becomes transparently clear. Come to think of it, perhaps it is only with the experience of deprivation, and its contrast with the expected and familiar, that the ability to be grateful and appreciative begins to emerge.

I can, however, say without hesitation that one way I have changed through my month of Naikan reflection is in terms of how I have simply become more sensitized to how many things do work for me fairly consistently and well. And due to this realization, I have come to a deeper appreciation (as in valuing or reverencing) of how easily I move through the day. In other words, things and people whose helpful workings and behaviors I took for granted I now consciously try to recognize and appreciate. Conversely, when I meditate upon (or even experience) the alarm not going off on time, or the coffeemaker being unavailable, or when I imagine my car engine not turning over in the morning, I find myself moved to a more profound gratitude and appreciation for the presence of these devices in my life. In short, my month of Naikan reflection has shaped me into being a person who has come to appreciate the great significance of the trivial and the routine.

Furthermore, I have come to understand through my Naikan practice that the process of becoming a grateful person, a more appreciative person, is in many ways the end result of what I

choose to focus on and pay attention to, the practice of which has had consequences for my emotional and overall psychological well-being. Naikan simply asks me to evaluate the state of my consciousness with all that is going on within and around me at any given point in time and reminds me that I always have a choice upon that which I chose to dwell. Even so, the reality is some days come easier than others:

It has been difficult for me these past two days to stay in tune with this period of Naikan reflection. Work was so busy yesterday and today I was wrapped up in just reading all I could on gratitude for my paper. But I am thankful for Emmy J's because it has such nice atmosphere in which to write. Yet I have to be focused because it would be so easy to get involved in conversations and I never would get any reading done. But I did receive a discount on the coffee from Bob and that was nice. The more I do this the more I am convinced of the connection between attention, mindfulness, and being grateful. And because this is true, at the same time I am becoming painfully aware at how "unmindful" I am...how quickly I seem to go into automatic and unconscious automatic at that. And when I get like that I also begin to notice a hurriedness, an intensity, almost a restriction within myself that is not expansive and open but a feeling is more narrow, rushed, and constrained. Did I say numb also? I don't like it. Is gratefulness more difficult when one is tired or stressed? What *is* the relationship between the pacing of one's day, one's life, stress, exhaustion, and the ability to be grateful or feeling the experience of gratitude?

(March 10, 2006)

Let me put it another way. It is not that I deny my feelings of frustration or disappointment when the tire on my car goes flat or I face the fact that my mother can't love me in the ways I desire. But I have a choice to make when my tire goes flat: I can choose to be grateful and appreciative

for the mechanic who has the skill to replace the tire or for the passing motorist who stops to help me. And when I call my mother to have a pleasant conversation, and she becomes critical of my judgment or some other aspect of my life, I can chose to dwell on the fact that this woman also sent me a hundred dollars the other day or, for that matter, has given me life. In this sense, living a life of gratitude does not eliminate negative experiences or emotions from my life. But Naikan practice provides less space for suffering because now my attentive repertoire is broadened and the experience of my suffering is mitigated because my attention is more balanced (Krech, 2002).

Yes, I want to be a more grateful and appreciative person. Before I began this project I knew that I wanted something to change but was uncertain what to change or how to go about it. I didn't even know whether this little experiment would have an impact upon me. What I did know was that I was simply tired, and sick of being petty, judgmental, controlling, yet seemingly out of control of my life. Just getting thorough a day seemed exhausting and I knew there had to be a better way to live. How often I felt that I was just going through the motions, oblivious to what I was doing and how it might be impacting others. The realization began to dawn on me that:

It makes me sick to think of how many minutes of the day go by unnoticed. Everything needs to slow down. The spaces between things need to become more acute, shine more brilliantly, smell more intensely, announce itself with greater clarity and presence. All too often the day goes by in a blur and getting to the Now becomes somewhat of an unconscious miracle. Attentiveness to what is brings Existence to the foreground of consciousness. The sheer gratuitousness of life begins to shine forth. (March 25, 2006)

I remember that on the day these particular words were penned, there seemed to be welling up from within me a deep desire to be gentler with myself and with others. I wanted to be more sensitive and transparent to what was transpiring around me. This desire evoked within me a remembrance of a revelatory dream I had some years back. In reflecting about this dream, I remembered that in it there:

...was no struggle. Just presence. Warmth and green and moist in a forest of crystalline purity as water is scooped up and ceremoniously and gently poured upon my head...I am home. I am at peace. There exists only this song, the movement, the feeling, the joy, the absolute gratitude that goes with the realization that in this moment I and Being are one in the same... (March 25, 2006)

The feeling evoked by the two words “grateful” and “appreciation” began to act as a cipher for how I wanted to experience my experience. I wanted simply to completely surrender to a moment in which all struggle ceased, to be fully present and appreciative of what was happening around me where all was:

Softness and acceptance. Softness and acceptance. Be like water. Being grateful and full of presence is becoming like water...in flowing stillness, like gliding over soft rounded pebbles in a gently flowing stream. The softness of the water has rounded the pebble with smooth contours from years of caress. This is presence and gratitude. Not fighting reality but being soft in the face of it. It is acceptance of what is. The rest is insanity. (March 25, 2006)

Like Cathy in the story, in fighting reality I continually reject what is offered in the moment for an illusory reality created by my mind. And because I am generally focused upon what I am not receiving from Life, and not fully embracing what I do receive in the hopes of obtaining

something better, my experience is one of on-going struggle, with sharp and jagged edges, hard, unforgiving, and filled with anger and resentment. Yet this way of living is as exhausting as it is familiar. What Naikan practice has enabled me to see is that there is no inevitability about this struggle. Here is a path to freedom. As I begin to cultivate willingness to move out of self-preoccupation I can gently, yet persistently, seek out those hitherto unknown spaces of graciousness hidden beneath the surface of my awareness. I have learned that I must be willing to see with new eyes, to perceive spaces, barely discernible to an eye jaded by years of habituated blindness, yet present beneath and within the commonplace.

Finally, I noticed one especially interesting facet of this practice of placing one's attention on life's blessings. As you practice placing your attention on the ways Life supports and sustains you, you actually begin to look for more things for which to be grateful. I am reminded here of Barbara Fredrickson's thesis that practicing gratitude broadens and builds one's emotional and cognitive repertoire. You begin to search out ways in which you can thank people who have been of service to you. I remember one practice in particular called "Mindful Thank-You's" (March, 3). In this particular exercise, instead of just mindlessly saying "thank-you" to someone who served you, you thank them and tell them precisely what need of yours was satisfied through their action(s).

At first I found this practice difficult on two counts. First, I found it counter-habitual to identify precisely what someone was doing in order to satisfy a particular need of mine. Secondly, the very act of then joining their action with my need in a fluid and genuine felt articulated response of thanks was a novel discipline in itself. For example, at the checkout counter at the local grocery store I wondered, do I thank the girl for bagging my groceries or for checking me out? The latter might have rolled more easily off the tongue but could definitely

have been misinterpreted. Consequently, I began thanking the clerk for bagging my groceries. What I noticed is that in order to do this mindfully and with presence, I needed to bring my attention completely to what she was doing, slow down the transaction, look her straight in the eye, and say, “Thank you very much for bagging my groceries today.” Though she kind of looked at me funny, it actually felt good turning this frequent and commonplace exchange into a moment of encounter and affirmation.

I continued to engage in this practice, all the while having my struggles, unsure I could master it, until the day I had my oil changed. When picking up my car, I effortlessly asked the manager who had changed my oil. He pointed out a large, mustached man. Getting out of my car, keys in hand, I walked over to him, looked him straight in the eye, and asked, “Are you the gentleman who changed the oil in my car?” After he responded that he was, I firmly shook his hand, and said without hesitation, “Thank you, sir, for changing the oil in my car. I truly appreciate it.” I walked away feeling I had just passed a final exam, a big warm feeling gurgling up in my chest. I had learned a new skill. My intent was to affirm this fellow’s value and the service he had provided. More importantly, I wanted him to *feel* that both he and his work were appreciated. He, on his part, probably thought I had smoked something.

Am I different? Have I changed? I could point to the fact that on the Brown & Ryan (2003) Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) my median score moved from a 3.0 (pre-Reflection) score to a 4.4 (post-Reflection) score. Or I could point out that on the Lyubormirsky Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubormirsky & Lepper, 1999) my total subjective hedonic points moved from a 16 (pre-reflection) to a 20 point total (post-reflection). And while this mathematical shift does correspond to what I feel has been an inside movement toward

increased contentment and satisfaction with my life, I find the meaning of such numbers a bit lacking, if not dubious in accuracy.

On the other hand, I can attest to the presence of a subtle but very real shift in my consciousness in this way: that I am now making a deliberate and conscious choice to see my life within a framework of gratitude and appreciation. I have chosen to engage in a practice of directing my attention to all the ways in which, both large and small, Life supports, nurtures, and sustains me. What I do notice is that when I do this, the experience of my experience shifts and changes. I become more peaceful and more centered. A softness and acceptance towards others and my external circumstances seems to well up within me. A more welcoming approach to my reality has begun to take root in me. I notice what is going on around me more. Choosing more frequently to attend to the reality around me, I find myself less preoccupied and obsessed with the reality within me. This in itself becomes a small liberation.

My Month of Naikan Reflection: New Possibilities for the Future?

In this last and final section I want to acknowledge how the practice of Naikan reflection has opened up for me and for others some very real and new possibilities for growth. In my own mind, there would have been no point to engaging in this practice unless I felt, at least initially and intuitively, it held out some healing for me, some new way of being-in-the-world that would open new possibilities to reinterpret and restructure my thoughts and emotions and how I experience life. It was also my hope, as a counselor-in-training, that one result of this practice might be to have something of value to offer future clients who may be interested in the philosophy of Naikan practice. I am pleased to report that in both of these dimensions I encountered a certain amount of success.

Through the practice of Naikan reflection, and in the embrace of the Naikan philosophy, there has opened up for me a new way of structuring my experience through the practice of refocusing my attention. As I practice on a daily basis the three questions, daily Naikan or Naikan *nichijo*, I learn to train my mind to deliberately choose to notice, to be present to, and to feel connected to all the ways other people, the environment, and even inanimate objects sustain me, contribute to my well-being, and grease the wheels of my daily existence. As I do this, what I begin to notice is that I am more intimately connected to others than I had previously believed. I begin to comprehend that in many respects my achievements are simply not mine alone, but are only realized through the sacrifice and generous help of others.

Even now, as I attend to the typing of this paper, the completion of which will be one more step towards obtaining my degree, I realize that this achievement is not mine alone. The ease with which I type these words is dependent upon the continued working of this computer, a computer both made and shipped to me by nameless, but very real, men and women. I further realize that without the car my grandmother provided me, without the loan the government granted me, and without the critical assistance of my project advisor, this achievement would not be possible. With this understanding, I come to appreciate, to reverence and value, the fact that my well-being is intrinsically tied to the well-being and generosity of countless others. And as I realize and meditate upon this fact, for that is what it is, I begin to reconnect with a community larger than myself. As I reflect upon the fact that the completion of my degree is not so much my achievement but an achievement orchestrated and supported by countless others, my isolation is momentarily overcome, and I see how even this task, so lonely at times in its pursuit, occurs only in relationship and in communion with others.

Reflection upon this fact, this real sense of interdependency, evokes within me a feeling of gratitude and appreciation as I realize how often:

We are encompassed by awe as we stare out into a bright starlit night and contemplate the vast grandeur of the cosmos. And I am filled with gratitude, and joy, overwhelmed at being not just a witness but a participant in such a cosmic symphony. This then gives rise to a sense of compassion, of care, as I sense my obligation to respond to my own existence and the existence of others who participate with me in this on-going drama from an attitude of concern, tenderness, and solicitude. If only, I think to myself, we would all just look up into the night sky together, simultaneously, forgetting about our own little petty egoic concerns just for a moment, perhaps in the moment of that shared self-transcendent experience we could come to a deeper and more profound comprehension of our inevitable destiny. (March 25, 2006)

I realize that I am not alone. I begin to realize that as I am willing to witness and be present to this on-going and precious overflowing of generosity upon and into my life, I simultaneously experience a very fleeting but real moment of inner warmth as a sense of life's graciousness wells up within me. As I dwell upon this feeling, nurture it with conscious attention, and emotionally massage it with meditation, I begin to feel a growing desire to give thanks. I feel warmed within my heart and compelled to support and build up others in return. As I become more aware of what is constantly transpiring around me that is free, that is offered, and that benefits my existence even when I am not aware of it, I find myself released from self-preoccupation and the self-constriction that goes with focus on my own internal drama. The result is that the less I focus on me, and the more I focus upon and appreciate that which is the event of Life surrounding me, the experience of my experience becomes more expansive, less

fearful, more balanced, more honest, and more real. I come to view my experience from a broader and more truthful vantage point and from within that broader perspective and truth, experience a new kind of freedom.

The practice of Naikan reflection has given me a new framework within which to structure, order, interpret, and thus experience my experience. I am still learning, for there is much to be unlearned. I continue to come up against and be bedeviled by a great deal of fear, narcissism, resentment, and entitlement. The old ways die hard. But I also believe that they do die. As I continue to practice the three Naikan questions, and allow the principles of Naikan philosophy to permeate my inner being, I have found and continue to find that the old scales have begun to fall from my eyes, and I can see my life with a greater clarity and precision.

Finally, after a month of committed Naikan practice, and because I have seen benefits in my own life, I have become convinced of its therapeutic and healing value. As the research literature demonstrates, there seems to be ample evidence that a life lived from a position of gratitude, thankfulness, and appreciation can have a significant positive emotional and physical impact upon the human person. Having experienced its effects upon my own life firsthand, I can attest that the daily faithful practice of Naikan reflection can be an effective path toward cultivating gratitude and appreciation in one's life. As such, Naikan philosophy, from a therapeutic perspective, is one more tool I would gladly have handy in my counseling practice.

*If the only prayer you ever said
was 'Thank you', that would be enough"*

-Meister Eckhardt

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

Practicing Naikan Reflection: Attention, Reflection, and Gratitude

In his book, *Naikan Therapy: Gratitude, Grace, and Japanese Art of Self-Reflection* (2002) and again in a major article in *Sun Magazine* (2004), Krech identifies the unique relationship between gratitude, attention, and insight or wisdom. The unique function of Naikan reflection is to enable us to step back from our lives, to see what we have hitherto not seen, to reveal what has up to that time been left hidden, and to garner a broader perspective of the content of our lives. Krech (2002) writes that:

Naikan broadens our view of reality. It's as if standing on top of a mountain, and we shift from a zoom lens to a wide angle lens. Now we can appreciate the broader panorama-our former perspective still included, but now accompanied by much that had been hidden. And that which is hidden makes the view extraordinary. (p.26)

Krech (2002) insists that the purpose of Naikan therapy is not to make us feel better, but in fact to help us feel the truth of our lives. Most times, Krech acknowledges, people at first come away from Naikan therapy with a sense of debt and even guilt. One may recall here Reynolds' (1977) experience of such guilt during his own Naikan retreat. Even my own daily Naikan reflection (*nichijo*) consistently reflected back that I am given, that I receive from others and my environment, vastly more than what I return in kind. Pondering this fact, I too experience a sense of indebtedness and even guilt. (It is not, at least initially, self-congratulatory to acknowledge that one is mostly a taker rather than a giver). However, I do become aware that a second and more subtle response within me is one of gratitude and appreciation. And this second movement, at least in my own mind, comprises a singularly unique change mechanism with

Naikan reflection: inasmuch as I respond to my life, my past as well as the events in the present, from a posture of gratitude and appreciation, the felt sense of my experience itself begins to shift and soften as I begin to soften inside. Consequently, I also notice that my behavior begins to shift as well. In other words, as the interpretation of my life broadens and shifts, so does my ability to respond to my life and to others differently. In fact, this capacity for existential resiliency and emotional flexibility in the face of an often disappointing Reality is a hallmark of one who adds the cultivation of gratitude and other positive qualities to their emotional repertoire (Fredrickson, 1998).

But there is yet another concept that I would like to point to here, a concept that I did not come across in my literature review on gratitude, but one that is quite predominant in the Naikan approach to living: the idea of grace (Krech, 2002). Grace, according to Krech, is when we realize that we may not deserve what we are receiving in life, but we are receiving it anyway. The problem is that too often we are not aware of the good that is right in front of us, because all we are paying attention to is what is perceived as undesirable. To illustrate this point, Krech tells a story about the day he took a hike up a mountain. The days before his hike, there had been a terrible storm, so that on his way up the mountain, Krech was all too aware of the number of trees that had fallen across the path. However, he also noticed that many of the trees had been cut and cleared away from the path. Upon gaining the summit, Krech reflected that, due to his exertion, it had been too easy to notice the difficulty the fallen and uncleared trees had caused him. However, he resolved to count, on his way down, the number of trees that had been cleared to make his way easier. After having reached the bottom once again, his final tally revealed the hitherto unknown truth: more trees had been cleared than not. If he had not bothered to pay

attention and count, he would never have known the difference, and his memory of his day's hike would have been one simply of great difficulty and stress.

The point is clear: Naikan reflection teaches us that we need to open our eyes to see the numerous ways that the world supports, nurtures, and sustains us. An interesting facet about Naikan reflection is that we do not ignore what is difficult or painful about our experience nor do we engage in some Pollyannaish escapism or New Age positive thinking in order to come to a place of gratitude and appreciation. On the contrary, Naikan reflection is unbending in its insistence upon truth and reality as the guides in our reflection. In fact, as Krech points out, it is the widening of our perception and the broadening of how we have hitherto interpreted our story, whether past or present, which leads us to recognition of how narrowly and painfully we have interpreted our experience. If we would just look at the facts of our existence, without embellishment, we would find great transformative power (Krech, 2004).

Allow me to offer another example to illustrate this point. Often times, people suffering from traumatic events continually revisit this event until it becomes the identifying hallmark of their lives. This is often true of people who suffer from alcoholism, depression, sexual or some kind of physical abuse. After the traumatic event, their entire lives become so focused around this one episode and they so self-identify with this one event, that this particular theme becomes the framework through which they interpret and thus experience their lives, both past and present. Naikan therapy insists that such an approach to one's life is both unconscious and restrictive, and to a large extent is based on a sort of unreality. While Naikan would not deny that such a traumatic event occurred, it would say that it is not, by any means, the dominant theme of one's life. It was only a part of one's life, but a part which has now eclipsed the entire story.

Naikan philosophy teaches that the key to redeeming such a life story, whether dealing with a major traumatic event or simply going about our daily lives, is insistence on paying attention to the whole play of our lives, and not one particular act. Or to use a different analogy, Naikan asks us to embrace the entire fabric that composes the tapestry of our lives, and not just one particular pattern or weave.

Because it is this practice of attention and reflection that guides us to real gratitude and appreciation, Naikan therapy is not merely an intellectual exercise. The truth of our lives, according to Krech and the Naikan philosophy, is found in paying attention to, noting, and even dwelling upon, the details of our lives that bespeak the gratuitousness and beneficence of our existence. While, as Emmons notes (2001), we cannot simply choose to be grateful, we can form the intention to focus on the benefits that lead to feeling grateful. What Emmons points to here is precisely, in my view, where the therapeutic benefits of Naikan reflection, attention, and gratitude come together: in coming to awareness that most of our pain and our suffering occur within a life story that is mostly full of love and support (Krech, 2002).

Let us then begin to pay attention that we may learn gratitude. Let us learn to be thoughtful and reflective so as to learn wisdom. Let us become wise as we marry our minds to our hearts

*“It is the familiar that usually eludes us in
life. What is before our nose, is what we see last”*

-William Barrett

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